

## Chapter Three

THE NEXT DAY, Annie and her mother crossed the ford and walked up to the crossroads and met Willa off the afternoon bus.

'What a journey!' said Willa.

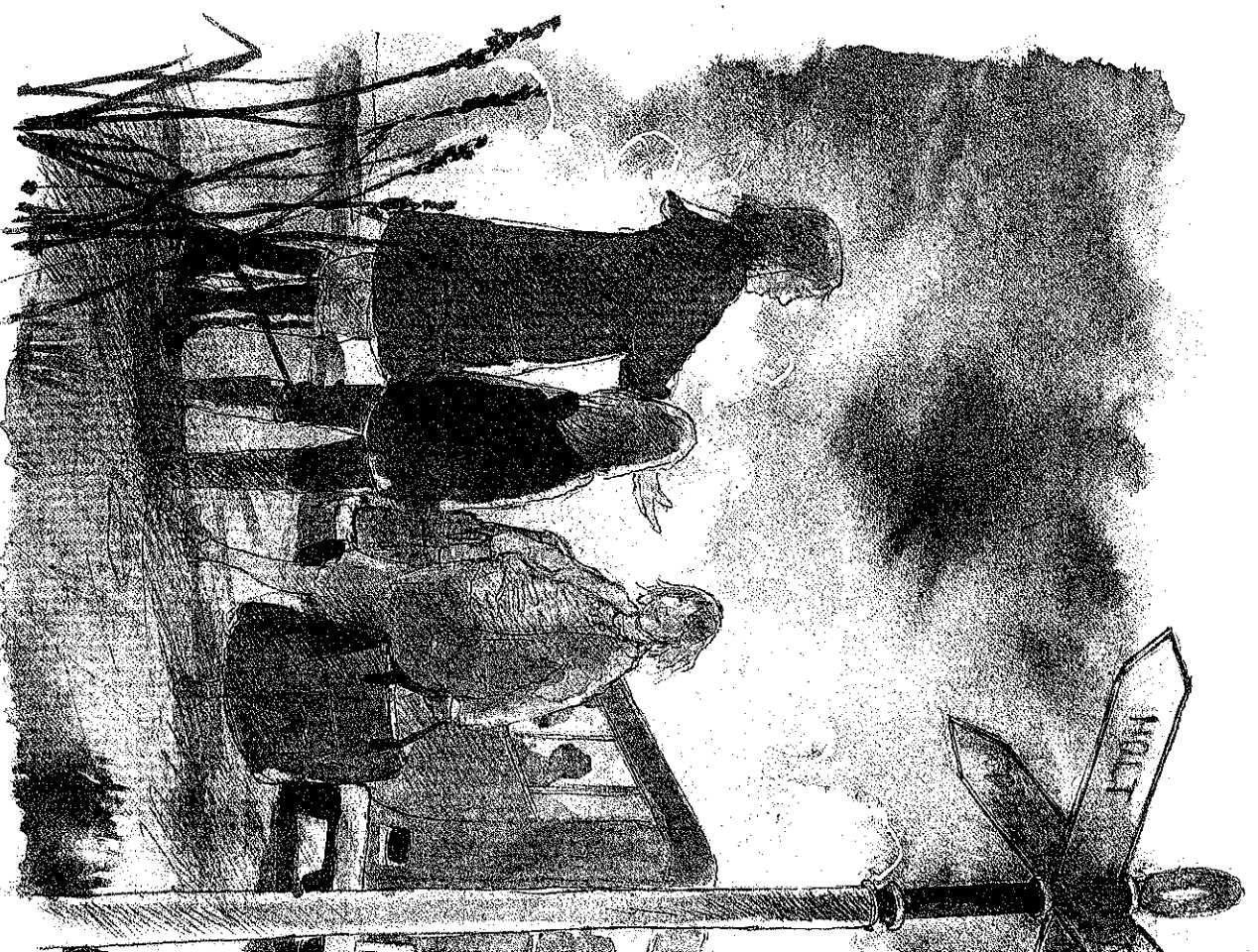
'Two changes?' asked her mother.

'Three!' said Willa. 'This place is miles from anywhere.'

Annie said nothing. She had never thought of their home and the great marsh as miles from anywhere. To her, they were everywhere, everywhere that really mattered.

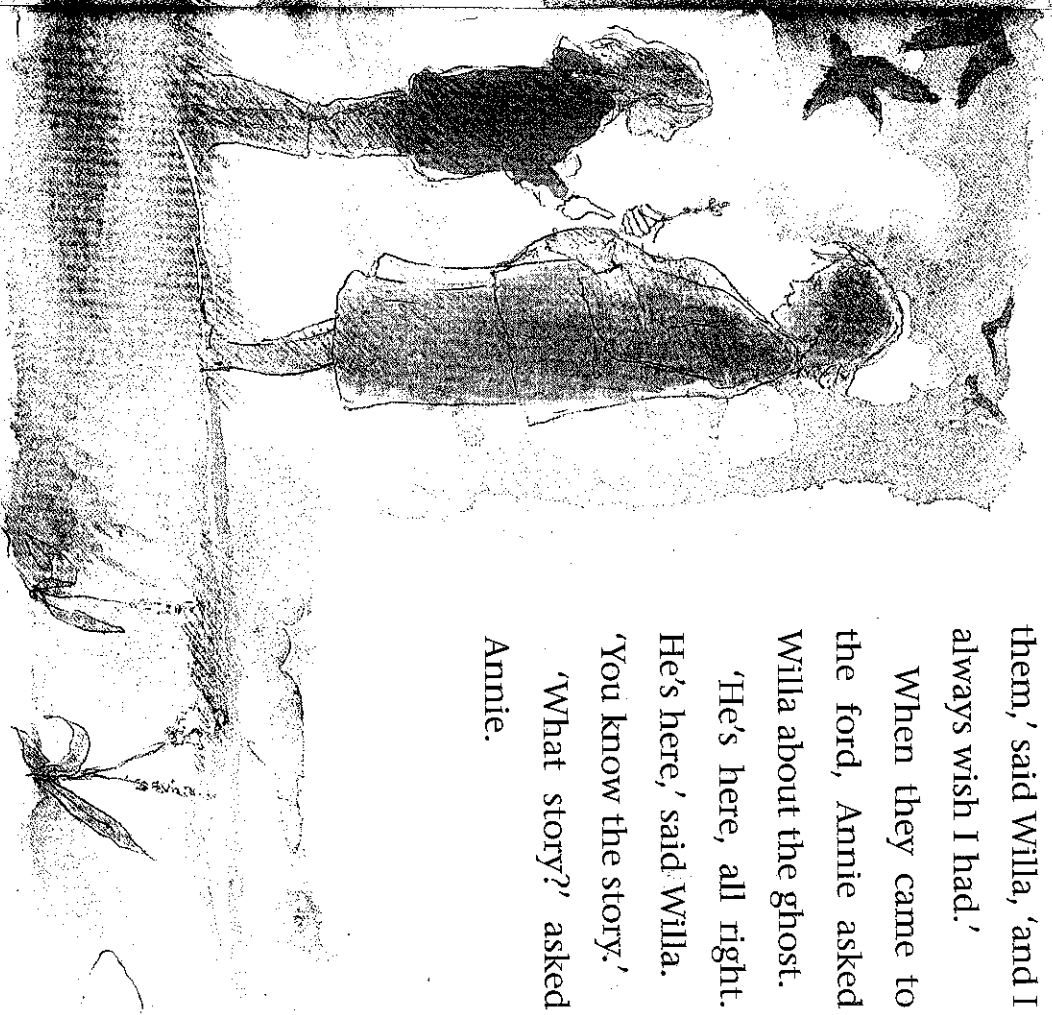
'Miles!' said Willa again. 'Hello Annie!'

Annie felt quite shy as she kissed her sister. Perhaps Willa felt shy too. It always took them a few minutes before they got used to each other and found it easy to talk to each other again. But once Annie and Willa began to talk, there was no stopping them.



They talked at breakfast and lunch and tea. They talked as they walked along the marsh track and talked their way along the legs of the dyke that led out to the booming sea.

Willa told Annie what it felt like to be having a baby and Annie told Willa about school in Waterslain – the same school Willa had attended when she was a girl. Willa told Annie about town life. Annie told Willa the names of plants and birds.



'I never did learn them,' said Willa, 'and I always wish I had.'

When they came to the ford, Annie asked Willa about the ghost.

'He's here, all right. He's here,' said Willa.

'You know the story.'

'What story?' asked Annie.

'When he was alive - I mean when he had a body - he used to own Mr Elkin's farm. That was in the days when there were highwaymen. Two of them ambushed him right here.'

Annie felt a cold finger slowly moving from the base of her spine up to her neck, and then spreading out across her shoulders.



'Where we're standing,' said Willa.

'What happened?' asked Annie.

'He wouldn't give them his money,' said Willa. 'He was that brave. So they killed him and his horse.'

'His horse!' cried Annie. 'That's horrible!' And at once she began to think of her lonely walks back from school - the dark January journeys lying in wait for her.

'So they got his money anyhow,' said Willa. 'That's what I've heard.'

'And the ghost?' said Annie.

'That goes up and down and around and pays out passers-by,' said Willa. The sisters fell silent and stared at the flashing water.



## Chapter Four

ON THE THIRD night after Willa came home there was a tremendous storm. Annie lay warm in her bed and listened to the wind going wild outside. It bumped and blundered against the walls of the

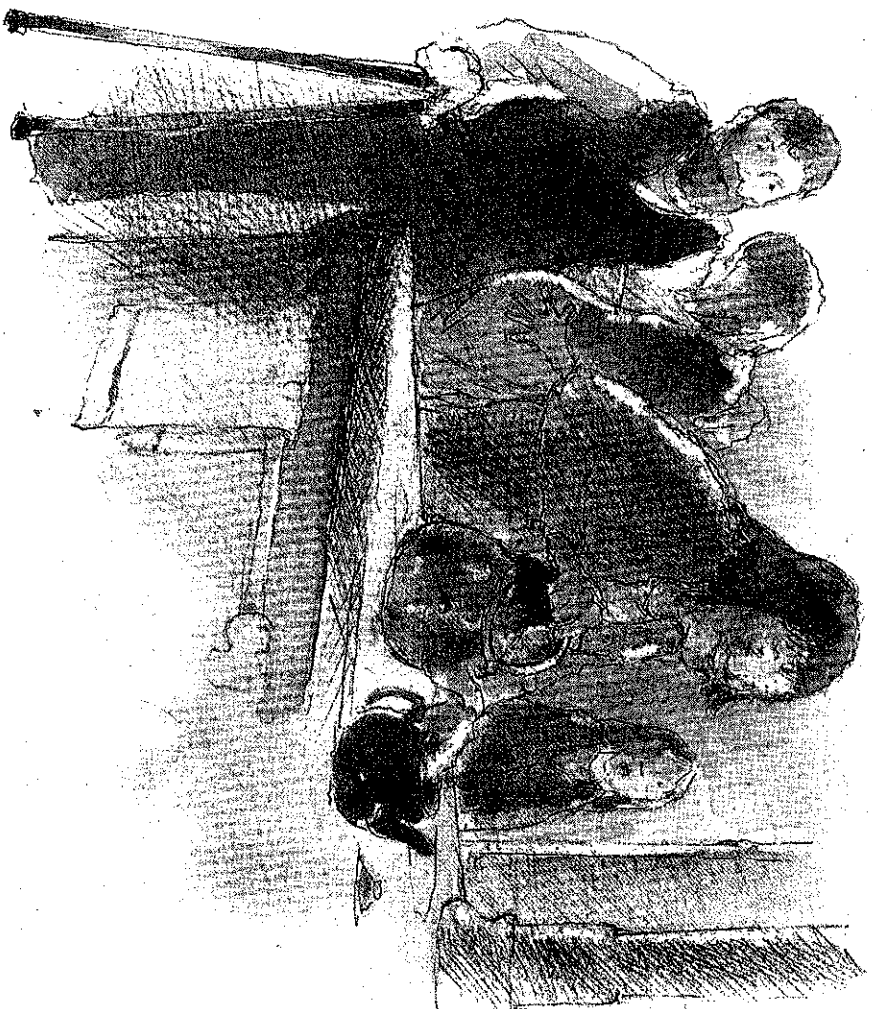
cottage, it whistled between its salty lips and gnashed its sharp teeth.

As Annie dozed, she began to imagine she was not in bed but in a boat, rocking, quite safe, far out at sea. The sheets of rain lashing at her little window were small waves smacking at the bows, streaming down the boat's sides ...

This was the night on which Willa's baby decided to be born. Just before midnight, it began to heave inside its mother like a buoy on surging water.



Everyone got up. Willa and Annie and their mother and even their father. All the lights were turned on again. The kettle began to sing.



'A cup of tea first,' said Annie's mother, looking pleased and shiny.

'You said Christmas,' protested Annie.

'You never can tell,' said her mother. 'Anyhow, early or late, storm or no storm, it's on its way. There's no stopping it now!'

'You could call it Storm,' said Mr Carter unexpectedly.

'That's not a name,' said Annie.

'Storm?' said Willa.

'Storm,' repeated Annie's mother. 'That's an old name in these parts.'

'Shall I ring the hospital?' said Willa. 'I know there's time but ...'

'I'll ring while you get yourself packed and ready,' said her mother.

'Ask them to come for me in half an hour,' said Willa and, taking her tea with her, she went upstairs to get ready.



When Annie's mother lifted the receiver, she first looked worried, and then she looked really alarmed.

'What's wrong?' said Mr Carter.

'Come and listen to this,' said Annie's mother.

Mr Carter dragged himself across the room and put an ear to the black receiver. Then he banged the telephone with the palm of his hand. He listened again. There was not a sound.

'Blast!' said Mr Carter. 'The lines are down'.  
'What,' said Annie's mother, 'are we going to do?'  
If anything, the storm was even fiercer now than it had been before. There was a howl of wind and a grating noise overhead, then outside the window a smash.

'Blast!' said Mr Carter, 'That's a tile gone.'  
'What are we going to do, Bill?' repeated Annie's mother. 'We must get Doctor Grant. You can't walk and I must stay in case ...'







'I'll go,' said Annie.

'No, no,' said her mother.

'I'm the only one who can,' Annie said. She had the strange feeling that it wasn't her but someone else speaking.

Mrs Carter frowned and shook her head.

'We can't do without a doctor,' said Annie. 'Willa can't.'

Annie's mother looked worried. 'It's the only way, Annie,' she said. 'We'll get you well wrapped up and you'll be all right. Go straight to Doctor Grant. Ask him to ring the hospital for an ambulance and then come at once himself.'

For once Annie took care over getting ready to go out. While her mother fussed round her and Willa sat very calm and upright on her bed, she put on her underclothes and then her track suit and then an old mackintosh over that.



Her mother stuffed a handtowel into one pocket and slipped a bar of chocolate into the other.

'I'll need my sou'wester,' said Annie. She picked up the hat from the floor, jammed it on and tied the lace under her chin.



'And your wellingtons,' said her mother.

'What else?' said Annie. 'My scarf.'

'A torch,' said her mother. 'Though you know the way so well by now you could walk there backwards.'

'You're a real sport, Annie,' said Willa.

'It's only the ford I don't like,' said Annie. 'I don't mind the rest.'

'I know,' said Annie's mother. 'Make sure you dry yourself properly.'

'You'll soon get past it,' said Willa. Then she gasped, pressed the palms of her hands against her stomach, and breathed deeply. 'This baby,' she said, 'I think it's in a hurry.'

